

October 22, 2005

Script for *Fabulous Furry Tales* podcast #2

Welcome to *Altivo's Fabulous Furry Tales*, a discussion of furry literature and related arts, presented every week or two. I'm your host, Altivo, the Clydesdale librarian.

Before we get to the topic for this week, I'd like to set the mood with a little music. This is "Wolves," written and performed by Chama C. Fox. You can find it and many of his other musical creations on the web at www.chama.de

[Music interlude: Wolves by Chama C. Fox, 3:25]

I think Chama's song leads right into my topic:

Jack London and the Wolves

Jack London, the author best known for his stories and books of the Yukon frontier, was actually born John Griffith Chaney in 1876 San Francisco. His parents separated at or before the time of his birth, if they were ever actually married at all, and he was raised in a foster home, largely self-educated. It may well be that to these early experiences he owed the independent adventurer's character that pervaded his life and writings. Whatever the reason, though, during his lifetime he captured the imaginations of millions of readers and his works continue to do the same today.

At the peak of his powers as a writer in 1902, London wrote *The Call of the Wild* in just over a month's time. He later said he thought of the novel as a counterpoise for his earlier account of a vicious wolf-husky hybrid and an equally vicious French Canadian musher in the story "Bâtard." Whatever the real inspiration, *The Call of the Wild* is probably the single work by which he is known to more people than by any of his other fine writings.

I find it particularly interesting to note that in 1902, at the same time that he was writing this book, London was carrying on a correspondence with the poet George Sterling. His letters to Sterling were consistently signed "Wolf." Several of his biographers have noted that this was his preferred nickname for himself and that he often signed letters in that way.

The Call of the Wild is the story of Buck, a St. Bernard and Collie mix, who was the top canine resident of Judge Miller's place in California until he was dognapped and sold into the north to serve as a sled dog in the Yukon gold rush. The book

begins with these lines:

“Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing, not alone for himself, but for every tide-water dog, strong of muscle and with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego. Because men, groping in the Arctic darkness, had found a yellow metal, and because steamship and transportation companies were booming the find, thousands of men were rushing into the Northland. These men wanted dogs, and the dogs they wanted were heavy dogs, with strong muscles by which to toil, and furry coats to protect them from the frost.”

Buck’s traumas and adventures, in which he is threatened both by men and by other dogs, lead him inevitably to the point at which he is in utter peril of his life. Run to exhaustion at the head of a team of dogs pulling an overloaded sled and driven by greenhorns, he collapses in the camp of the sensible and sensitive John Thornton. Despite Thornton’s good advice, the inexperienced adventurers insist that they will continue their trip to Dawson on the thawing ice of the Yukon River; but the exhausted dog refuses to get back to his feet, even in the face of the whip and finally a club. Thornton cuts Buck from the traces and after a brief skirmish with the dog’s owner, the remainder of the team continues onward only to vanish into the river when the ice gives way a quarter of a mile beyond.

As we expect in a good dog story, John Thornton is a Samaritan who nurses Buck back to health and wins his unquestioning devotion and obedience. Buck slowly forgets Judge Miller’s place and learns to live in his here and now, but as he does so, he begins to dream strange things and feel the primeval call of the wolf pack in his heart. The dog’s loyalty to Thornton is unbreakable, but when the man finally meets death at the hands of local natives, Buck is at last set free and becomes a feral, running with the wolf pack and living as one of them. He never forgets John Thornton, but he never returns again to the company of humans either. The story ends with some of the most familiar and famous lines ever written by an American:

“In the summers there is one visitor, however, to that valley, of which the Yeehats do not know. It is a great, gloriously coated wolf, like, and yet unlike, all other wolves. He crosses alone from the smiling timber land and comes down into an open space among the trees. Here a yellow stream flows from rotted moose-hide sacks and sinks into the ground, with long grasses growing through it and vegetable mould overrunning it and hiding its yellow from the sun; and here he muses for a time, howling once, long and mournfully, ere he departs.

“But he is not always alone. When the long winter nights come on and the wolves follow their meat into the lower valleys, he may be seen running at the head of the pack through the pale moonlight of glimmering borealis, leaping gigantic above his fellows, his great throat a-bellow as he sings a song of the younger world, which is the song of the pack.”

Though London’s protagonist does not ever speak in human words and his story is told in the third person, the entire novel is written from the point of view of the dog. We know what he feels, sees, and thinks, while the behaviors and motivations

of the human characters can only be inferred from their observable actions. This is the story of a yearning, a growing call, that cannot be denied and must be answered rather than analyzed or understood.

Three years after Buck's story catapulted him to financial and literary success, Jack London began writing *White Fang*, a novel that seems to tell just the opposite story. In *White Fang*, a wolf book if *The Call of the Wild* can be called a dog book. The wolf White Fang makes the ancient covenant with man, trading his abilities for security, and gradually becomes tame. He ends in a situation not unlike that in which Buck began *The Call of the Wild*, but he must be stronger and smarter than Buck in order to maintain his comfortable retirement, or else he must become completely acquiescent and dependent upon his human masters.

At the same time, the author began his own gradual withdrawal from glittering and wealthy society, seeking instead to fulfill his own dreams of independence and planning to build a stronghold he called "Wolf House", to be made of stone so it would last for ages. The man who named himself "Wolf" wrote of animals as if they were people, and of people as if they were animals. He saw no difference between human and animal societies, but instead found each to have both virtue and defect. I particularly respect Jack London for his consistent ability to tell a story from the chosen point of view, without the need to fall into omniscience or to go to the extreme of first person narration in order to set the scene and build the plot. His empathy for animals, and especially for canines, shines forth in nearly all of his writing, and I recommend him to you without reservation if you do not already know him.

Now let's have a look in the mailbox, but first I want to thank all of you who sent encouraging messages after the last program on the three S's: Sewell, Saunders, and Salten. One very helpful listener in Vermont says:

"I think that we can say pretty firmly that Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* was not the first of its kind, though it's one of the few that most people today have actually heard of. For example, in 1840, Thomas Smith's *The Life Story of a Fox, Written by Himself* was published in England. The book, actually from the first person perspectives of several different foxes, was written to show the cruelty of fox hunting. Even earlier, in 1760, *The Life and Adventures of a Cat* was published by an anonymous author..."

As it happens, I was aware of *The Life and Adventures of a Cat*, but discounted it as belonging in the same class with Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles* or Aesop's *Fables*. It's a parody of Henry Fielding's *The Life and Adventures of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, and some have even suspected that Fielding wrote it himself. Thomas Smith's book, though, is new to me. With help from this same listener, I have obtained a copy and may have something to say about it in the future.

She also notes that Felix Salten's own life had a sad ending since, being Jewish, he died in the Nazi Holocaust. I had wondered about that, and his death date in 1942 did fit, but my sources were silent on the subject.

That brings me to the conclusion of this week's discussion. Thanks for listening, and let me once more encourage you to contribute your thoughts and suggestions. You can send your e-mail to altivo at livejournal dot com. Until next time then, good reading to all.

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